PITTA

Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 13 Number 1 January 2016

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 17th January 2016: Narsapur. Meeting point: Punjagutta (opp. Mangatrai Pearls), 6.30AM.

Spanning an area of over 40 sq. km, the Narsapur Forest is well known for its bird life. The forest is rich in small woodland birds, woodpeckers and flycatchers. Brown Fish Owl, Indian Pitta, White-bellied Drongo etc are some of the interesting sightings during past visits. Narsapur Lake also has the potential of throwing up some surprises. This will be a half-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Mr Shafaat Ulla (98492-29552).

MY FIRST-EVER BIRDING TRIP

Text and photos: Shreyas Reddy M

Brahminy Starling

I have recently become a student member of BSAP. I had gone to my first-ever birding field trip to Manjeera Barrage and the surrounding lakes.

Black-winged Stilt and Crocodile

Humayun uncle and Shafaat uncle helped me identify the birds and the other uncles and aunts encouraged me.

I spotted Purple Heron (*Ardea purpirea*), Indian Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*), Painted Stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*), Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), Red-wattled Lapwing (DidYouDoIt bird) (*Vanellus indicus*), Black Drongo (Kotwal) (*Dicrurus macrocercus*), Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*), Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), Indian Spot-billed Duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*), Baya Weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*) and their nests, Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*), Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*), etc. Many birds for the first time in my life!

Of all the above birds, I liked the Red-wattled Lapwing and Bronze-winged Jacana very much.

I can't wait for the next BSAP Field trip to try my new binoculars.

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Bird of the Month

Text and photo: Umesh Mani

White-bellied Drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*)

White-bellied Drongo (Talakona, 23-08-2015)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Dicruridae
Genus: *Dicrurus*
Species: *D. caerulescens*
Size: 24 cm

Description & distribution: The White-bellied Drongo is a species of drongo found only on the Indian sub-continent, its range being spread across Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It is mainly black, like most drongos, but has a white belly and vent (with the two Sri Lankan sub-species, *D. c. insularis* of the northern dry zone and *D. c. leucopygialis* of the southern wet zone, having white only on the vent). The throat and breast are greyish, and the upperparts, though black, are not glossy. The tail is not as deeply forked as the Black Drongo. Young White-bellied Drongos are all-black and can resemble Black Drongos, though smaller and more compact. Young Black Drongos, on the other hand, have a lot of white on their bellies and can be confused with the White-bellied Drongo, though the white is quite scaly in appearance. In general, White-bellied Drongos in the northern parts of the range are larger, with the size declining as one moves south; the extent of white on the underside also declines with size.

The White-bellied Drongo is a resident breeder in India and Sri Lanka. In India, it is seen in the peninsular regions south of the Himalayas, west till the Aravallis and east till the Gangetic Delta.

Habitat & behaviour: The White-bellied Drongo prefers dry scrub or open forests. Usually seen singly or in small groups of up to three birds, it tends to sit upright on or close to tree-tops, and makes short aerial sallies to capture insects in the air. It may use its claws to pick up larger insects, and also to handle other prey - being opportunistic, it is known to even pick up small birds, besides sometimes partaking of flower nectar. Another commonly-observed behaviour is capturing insects that are attracted to street lights in the night. Its call is a series of staccato notes, intermingled with clear notes, and it is also known to mimic other birds, besides sometimes imitating the alarm call of the squirrel and the mewing of the cat.

Nesting: The White-bellied Drongo breeds from February to July. The nest is a grass-lined cup made of twigs, usually 20-30 feet above the ground in tree forks. It is very aggressive when nesting, and will attack potential threats much larger than itself. The usual clutch consists of 2-7 pale salmon-coloured eggs with reddish blotches on the broad end.

Local name: The White-bellied Drongo is known as *'nalla passala poligadu', 'konda passala poligadu'* or *'tellapotta aitrina'* in Telugu, *'pahari bhujanga'* in Hindi, and *'erattai vaalan kuruvi'* in Tamil (a name it shares with the Black Drongo and the Ashy Drongo).

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BIRDING WITH FREEDOM

Trip Report – Shamirpet, 15th November 2015

Text and photos: Lawrence Mathappan

Scaly-breasted Munia

I could never completely enjoy birding in a car, as we do on regular basis. We would get into the car, reach the birding site, park the car and then carry our kit and start birding, then walk back to the car and move on. I feel that this way, we miss a lot as we travel from one place to another.

So I proposed to my friend Hemant that he and I go birding on his motorcycle to Shamirpet and nearby areas.

With a lot of excitement, I was ready very early on a cloudy Sunday morning with threats of possible showers. This added to the excitement as I waited for the arrival of my ride. Waiting was painful - looking at the watch, I realized Hemant needed to be given a wakeup call!

But finally when I called, he was already on the way. Soon he reached and we set course. WOW! The feeling of the fresh, early morning breeze on the face set one's soul free as we sped towards Shamirpet. The sun peeping through the clouds intermittently gave an added thrill to the drive, and I was able to see the greenery all around and hear the calls of the early birds.

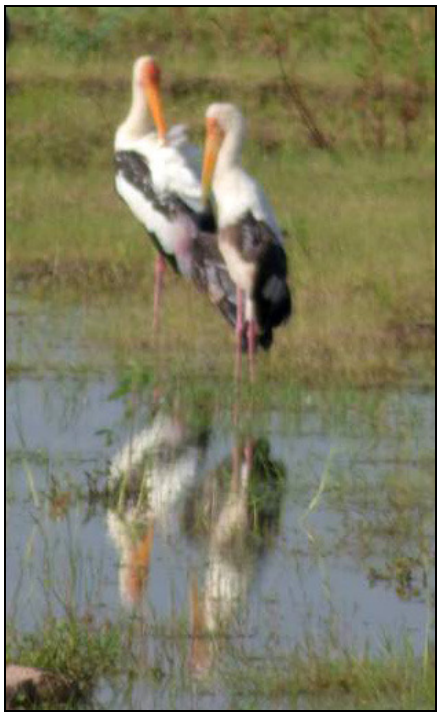
Suddenly I shouted out to Hemant, and we skidded to a stop. Hemant asked what the excitement was all about. I told him, "I think I saw a Painted Francolin (*Francolinus pictus*), a few hundred meters back". Turning the bike around, we raced back to the spot. In a snap the camera popped out and click, click, we froze the bird in the frame. Sadly, it turned out to be the Grey Francolin (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), all puffed up and looking at us!

Grey Francolin

We weaved through the villages where the smell of wet fields and smoke from the morning cooking gave a feeling of freshness that we miss living in the modern dwellings. We were treated to the chirps of the sparrows, busy foraging, with Grey Francolins and Indian Silverbills (*Euodice malabarica*). Cattle were being taken to the fields as we drove slowly, soaking in nature at its best.

We turned on to the road which took us to the backwaters of the Shamirpet Lake. With the recent showers, a number of small streams were snaking their way into the lake. Hemant had other ideas, and took off, sliding, skidding and twisting through the streams and slush. It was fun - I felt like a cowboy taming a wild horse!

We reached the lake edge and rode on to the top of a small hillock which usually gets submerged when the water level is normal. From there we had a panoramic view of the lake.



Painted Stork

We saw the usual flock of Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*), Indian Spot-billed Ducks (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) and some Northern Pintails (*Anas acuta*) decorating the edge of the lake. River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) flew across where we stood and dived to pick up fish. Far across the lake, on a tree we saw some movement, and a little while later as the birds flew towards the lake, we identified them as Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*).

Blue Rock Thrush

The sun was up, warming us and making us hungry. As we walked back, Red-wattled Lapwings (*Vanellus indicus*), startled at seeing us, announced their surprise, calling and flying beside us. As we hit dry land we saw an Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*), a Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*), and a Common Stonechat (*Saxicola toruatus*).

We landed at a small eatery beside the MediCiti Hospital gate and had some hot *pooris* and *aloo sabji* with hot *chai*. Feeling refreshed, we decided to check some nearby areas. Sitting on a wire we saw the Jacobin (or Pied Crested) Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*) balancing against the breeze that was almost pushing it off.

Jacobin Cuckoo

We then drove on to the road that led us to a temple on a hill top. We heard the calls of Painted Francolins but the eyes searched in vain.

That's when I got a call from my friend Dr Maini, who has a farm nearby, inviting us for lunch. This took us towards Akbarjapet. There were supposed to be some resident Spotted Owlets (*Athene brama*) here.

While the lunch was getting ready, Hemant suddenly vanished! He returned an hour later, smiling at having sighted and captured the Owlet and a few more birds in the camera.

Black Redstart (female)

Sitting down, we ate a hearty lunch of vegetables fresh from the farm, relaxed for a while, and did some Macro photography. We were informed by our host about an abandoned nest with eggs. We couldn't identify them, though.

The unidentified eggs

After a while, thanking our host, we set course towards Kallkal, a village beyond Medchal. On the way we checked the Medchal Lake, which was dry. Driving around the area we saw no water bodies but we had had our fill of birds for the day and decided to make longer trips in the future.

Common Jezebel mating

On the way back, I fondly remembered the bikes of the bygone years - the old Triumph, BSA, Rajdoot, Bullet and Jawa - but whichever the bike, the thrill of riding remained the same.

Indian Peafowl

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